

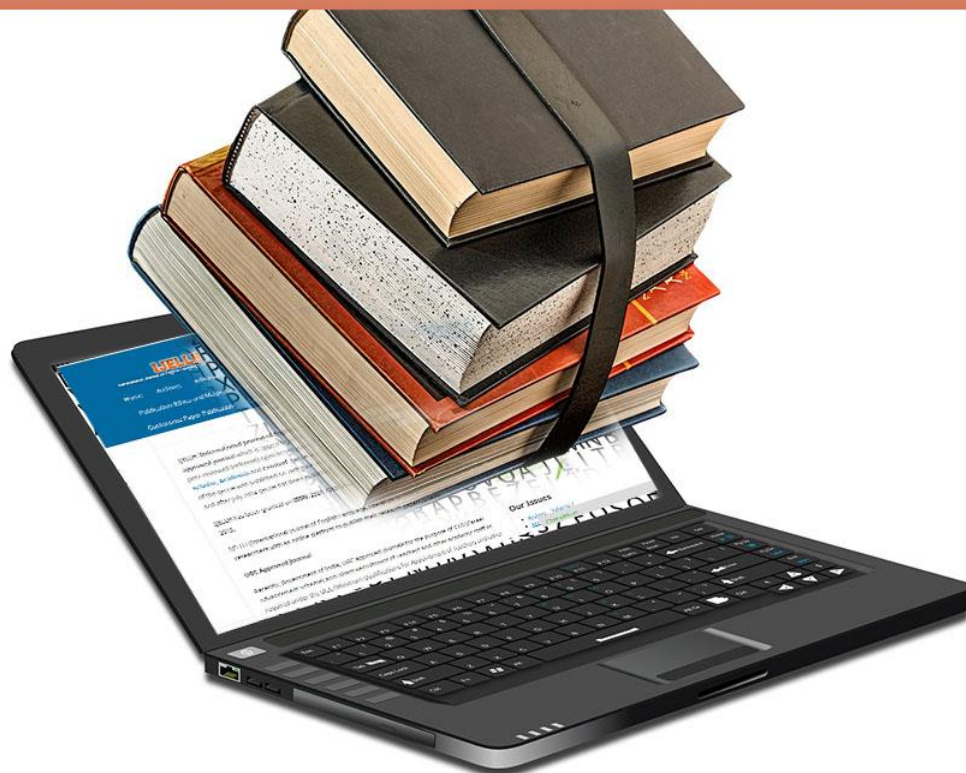
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T.Swarnalatha

Reg No: 18SEM09

MPhil Scholar,

Sadakathullah Appa College, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,

Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India

swarnalatha.rvst@gmail.com

Dr. A. Alis Sofia

Research Guide, Assistant Professor,

Sadakathullah Appa College, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,

Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India

A Transforming Image of a Woman in Gita Mehta's *Raj*

Abstract

Gita Mehta occupies a prestigious place in Indian Writing in English whose writing mainly investigates Indian culture, tradition and political condition of India. Being a female author, her tendency of writing issues pertaining women could certainly be common to detect the identity of women in the society. Women are trapped in the circle of religion, culture, tradition and all social taboos. The heroines of Mehta break the shell of such taboo and emerge themselves as new individuals in the society. This paper will show how the novel *Raj* is viewed as a wide scope for a feminist analysis. Her debut novel *Raj* sets in India where male supremacy is glorified in many perspectives. Mehta's text not only depicts women's hardship but also it reveals the need for change with regards to the status of women in today's world.

Keywords: empower, discrimination, transformation, male domination, individual

Gita Mehta is a well-known writer in Indian Writing in English. Her novel, *Raj* reveals the issues of Hindu women in Pre-independent and Post-independent India in a realistic manner. *Raj* can be read as a historical text where we can discover a royal woman who is the sufferer of the patriarchal society and the victim of the male chauvinism. The story covers the progression of a female protagonist born into Indian nobility under the British Raj. The article focuses on the transformation of the protagonist Jaya who dismisses her identity as an Indian Princess and struggles hard to emerge as new women politician in the democratic India. This historical fiction traces some facts about early Indian struggle for independence.

In *Raj*, the novelist covers all the threads of Indian history between 1857 and 1950 with political background to explore human relationships in a colonial society. The novel *Raj* is structurally divided into four books in which the life journey of Jaya is revealed with a historic dimensions. The first book titled 'Balmer' which is the name of a small state in Rajasthan where Jaya is born to the king Jai Singh and the Maharani of the state in the time of Indian renaissance. Maharaja Jai Singh does not celebrate the birth of his female child in a traditional manner. While Jaya cries in her childhood, Jai Singh comments: "This is not the sound of a crying baby. That is a battle cry. If the name is auspicious, let's call her Jaya, victory" (Raj 44).

For Jai Singh, Jaya is an indication of victory. Maharani wants her daughter to be educated in the traditional manner. Following her mother's instruction, Jaya is trained to imbibe some virtuous qualities of woman who is meant to be very submissive and very pleasing to their husband in a traditional way so that she could adjust in her marital life. After the death of her brother Tikka and her father Maharaja Jai Singh, Jaya's mother becomes a sati mata. Jaya's uncle usurps the kingdom and he finalises Jaya's marriage with Prince Pratap Singh of Sirpur.

The second book named 'Sirpur' deals with the marital life of Jaya and Pratap Singh. Jaya faces the conflict between tradition and modernity in her marital life. Jaya is shocked to learn that Pratap is forced to marry her. Though she is unable to receive love, she performs her duty as a wife regularly. Jaya longs to earn love, human dignity and affection from her husband. In order to transform her traditional look into a fashionable lady, Pratap instructs Lady Modi to cut the long hair of Jaya into short. Even in these circumstances, she laments: "Long hair is one of the emblems of a married woman. It would be inauspicious for my husband" (Raj 195).

The novel *Raj* examines how man-woman relationship is on the verge of modernity. A sense of male dominance, misunderstanding and continuous search for identity are prevalent in *Raj* in the delineation of husband-wife relationship. Pratap's numerous visits to England and his desire towards westernization have driven him infatuated with a fashionable Anglo-Indian dancer named Esme Moore. Pratap finds his wife too traditional and not acquiring any western style. Being a traditional woman, she remains obedient, submissive and loyal to her husband. Here, Mehta exposes Indian tradition by which a woman is trained to play her submissive role in the family whereas for men, even the marriage would not prevent them from wooing with another woman. Kate Millett, an American feminist and activist in her work *Sexual Politics*, asserts that in the patriarchal society, women "could neither own nor earn in their own rights" and are regarded as "non-person without legal status" (Millet 39).

In the third book named 'Maharani', Mehta attempts to showcase the horrible condition of Jaya for being an upholder of a traditional woman who endures her suffering even when her role of motherhood is prohibited by her husband. After the demise of Maharaja Victor, Prince Pratap takes over throne as a king of Sirpur. When Jaya gives birth to a male-child named Arjun, she feels secured. As Pratap is in a male-dominated world, he

fails to realize the value of motherhood. He wounds the heart of Jaya profoundly by preventing her from feeding his own child. He employs a wet nurse to feed his child. Maharajah Pratap has not only robbed her of the dignity of being a wife, but also makes her to lose the rights of maternity. Though Jaya gets angry over his atrocities, as a traditional wife she subdues her anger in the depth of her heart. This kind of male domination is observed by Millett in *Sexual Politics* who states that men considers his life partner as “who is nothing but an object to him in the most literal sense” (Millett 20). Mehta portrays the pathetic condition of the children who are forced into prostitution. Jaya visits a brothel in Calcutta where she discovers many children whom are the victims of masculinist methods and attitudes. These children are the mere products of rape in the eyes of the British.

The fourth book titled ‘Regent’ reveals how Jaya is evolved as an individual. Jaya predicts that her husband’s perverse and rebellious nature would be a boundless threat to her position in Sirpur. She realizes that it is the time to demand her rights as Regent of Sirpur from Pratap. She earns the title ‘the Regent’ until Arjun is of an age to take the throne. Soon after her husband’s death, she hears the news of her son’s death in a plane crash which is the biggest tragedy that she encounters in her life.

As a widow, Jaya and her mother have been subjected to discrimination and social taboos. Hindu society follows the practice of sati by which a widowed woman either voluntarily or by force a woman burns to death on her husband’s funeral pyre. Many communities in India shun widows. They are abandoned by their families. Their presence in ritual, celebration and ceremonies are perceived as inauspicious. They must renounce all worldly pleasures. They face a variety of societal taboos. Mehta attempts to explore how widows are treated as inhuman and discriminatory through the hardship faced by Jaya and her mother after they have lost their husbands.

When Jaya's mother becomes a widow, she expels herself from her position as Maharani and becomes a 'Sati Mata'. On the other hand, Jaya is humiliated as an unlucky and unclean woman. Raj Guru of Sirpur uses Jaya's widowhood as an advantage and he tries to keep Jaya away from the administration and from her son Arjun. Raj Guru boldly informs her son that Jaya is unclean. He says to Maharaja Arjun: "Your mother cannot be with you at this time. She is unclean" (Raj 399).

Here Mehta pathetically presents the painful condition of widowhood in a pre-independent India. Jaya is isolated and treated as unclean. After her husband's death, she has been confined to the airless puja room for thirteen days. She is not even permitted to enter into her own apartment during the period. In the eyes of the Hindu society, her widowhood is a curse on her. Mehta observes the treatment of widowhood in the olden India. Her novel *Raj* reflects those observations by describing Jaya's condition in the society as a widow in the pathetic manner: "There were no glass bangles to be slipped onto her wrists, no long minutes spend combing the thick hair that had fallen to her knees, no sindoor to mark the circle of matrimony on her forehead. She did not even have to cover her shaved head. A widow was not considered desirable, only unlucky" (Raj 355).

After the series of mishaps, Jaya's mother inculcates hope in Jaya by saying that 'True Sati' is not a solution after the death of her husband but continues to survive by enduring all the hardships and ordeals. Jaya recalls the words of Raj Guru who provokes Jaya's mind with nationalism and the ideology of the Nationalists of India. Raj Guru's provoking lines about the nationalists intensifies Jaya's confidence. Amidst all these mental pressure, she grips her life to survive as the guardian of the people. Though a chain of tragedies struck her, Jaya does not like to get herself submerged into the wasteland of despair, depression and bewilderment. She endures all her struggle with indomitable will. After

realizing that she cannot escape from destiny, the words of the Raj Guru comes to her mind: “your dharma is protection Bai- Sa. You cannot escape your destiny” (Raj 460).

By the time the novel ends, Jaya gradually develops and emerges as a matured woman who identifies her space in the society. As Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* quotes: “A woman who is not afraid of men frightens them” (Beauvoir 698). As the novel proceeds further, Jaya undergoes the process of self-analysis and self-realization. She transforms herself as a courageous woman in the midst of all troubles being still there in her life. After India attained independence, she leads a meaningful life by serving her people not as Maharani, but as one of them. True to her name Jaya which means victory, she succeeds in general election. She is projected as a free, self-confident, self-reliant woman of free India.

Though Jaya is from the royal family, she suffers like an ordinary Hindu woman. The lessons of Rajaniti which she learnt from her childhood strengthen her in her critical period. The novel *Raj* is designed with double focus: firstly, it is a historical fiction. Secondly, it explores the story of Jaya’s transformation to set her identity as a human being. Thematically, the novel overcomes the following binary thinking such as detachment vs attachment, modernity vs tradition, and finally submission to empowerment.

A drastic change comes in the life of Jaya in two significant ways: through a chain of deaths in her family (It comprises the death of her brother and father and after her marriage, her brother in law, her husband and her beloved son Arjun) and through changes in the political condition of India. As Regent, she has contributed to the improvement of the kingdom of Sirpur. As progressive thinker, Jaya achieves various tasks for the welfare of the society. Gita Mehta’s narrative in *Raj* deals with the social hypocrisies and the identity of Jaya that interwoven with anguish and conflict in order to depict today’s world. Jaya is evolved as a strong freedom fighter who empowers herself to win over her husband and the society in her personal and political life.

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